

**Dennis Haskell, *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems*.
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When I began to read Dennis Haskell's *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems*, it quickly became apparent why I was asked to review it: we have both spent much of our working lives outside our home countries. Dennis Haskell is Australian. I am Canadian. Both countries are former British colonies with similar legal systems and forms of government. Even the grid systems of our major cities are inherited from those original Western conquerors, the Romans. (See Haskell's poem "Abracadabra" about urban grids and travelling to Perth from outside Australia.) But does that mean we map the world we encounter away from "home" along the same lines as our colonial masters?

Haskell raises that question with the title of his Selected Poems: *What Are You Doing Here?* Scholarly journals are devoted to Canadian-Australian studies, making it clear we have a lot in common. Are our poetic observations about cultures encountered away from "home" tainted by colonial cultural assumptions? After years of working away from "home" in other cultures Haskell and I have avoided Northrop Frye's "garrison mentality," which might affect countrymen who have not travelled, or lived away. But as poets who have lived abroad don't we also see our homelands with a fresh eye because of that time away? This review will attempt to explore all these questions.

The title of Haskell's poem, "In New Bangkok" from the 1993 collection, "Abracadabra," plays with the Western yearning for an exotic Thailand. And yet, his observations could be seen to reduce Bangkok to a tourist destination which exists solely to entice Westerners:

Only at night Patpong Street
sets its fierce, frantic
clattering and clamouring
market face
to Western eyes that meet
makeshift plastic
and canvas sheets
alert for sudden rain,
trinkets and earrings, t-shirts and toys,
gold model Buddhas and specials
on cocks and cunts: nothing here/is not for sale. (26)

In "The Last Emperor" from Haskell's relatively recent collection, "All the Time in the World" (2006), the narrator's observations about Mao souvenirs in a PRC market indirectly judge:

2000 a.d.
 Now Mao's perpetual revolution
 is an hallucination of unstoppable building,
 the PRC gilding itself before our eyes... (115)

Whose eyes are responsible for this gaze? That is not acknowledged.

In the poem "Thaipusam," also from the 1993 collection, "Abracadabra," Haskell describes the Tamil penitents taking part in the ritual with a clinical distance: "One set of Indian eyes lolls as if in pain; he staggers/then stands erect: mind triumphs over body again" (40).

I question the inclusion of this relatively early poem from the poet's career in this *Selected Poems* because it diminishes the humanity of the observed penitents. In "The Frame," also originally from the collection, "Abracadabra," Haskell reduces multicultural Singapore to a set of cut outs and stereotypes:

... Bright lights
 and tasseled icons
 keep Chinese dead at bay.

... and Muslim indifference,
 the women's faces peering
 out of nunnish clothes.... (37)

The narrator of this poem describes the "The language legislated upon them..." as a "staccato sing song/Singa Pura English, lah" (37). The traditional values of the Chinese community are described with this simile,

Crooked branched trees stand
 still in the hazy, air
 firm and sure, like Confucian ethics... (38)

On the other hand, the poem, "Our Century" from the later collection, "The Ghost Names Sing" (1997), demonstrates the insight to present an Australia trying to re-invent itself the way Singapore has. A similar degree of awareness and sensitivity is obvious in the poem "Reality's Conquests," also from his 2006 collection, "All the Time in the World." Haskell's poetic persona flies above an Iranian desert and admits:

Down there, in a land I think of,
 I confess, as veils and *fatwahs*,
 radicals and moderates fight it out;
 up here, in an eternity of air,
 everything is quite right, and nothing is quite real. (116)

He ends the stanza with a rhetorical question which includes one of the many original similes from his *Selected Poems*:

Who below ever thinks
there are engines slumbering above them
day night day night, even the sunlight
stretched like a strange elastic. (116)

Haskell can be very good at evoking the psychological distance created by travelling long literal distances. In the facing poem, “Understandings,” Haskell casts his traveller’s eye on another destination and quips:

The full measure of darkness
dissipates like the value of English,
the wheels tonguing their lingo
of clicketty and clack
as France so slowly becomes light.
Now meaning must settle inside my head. (117)

In his introduction, Haskell describes “cultural interaction” as “one of the most enriching experiences available” (ix). He has lived and taught in many countries: England, France, Germany, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and the USA. The poetry of such a peripatetic academic can’t help but interact with many cultures – including that of his native Australia.

In *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems*, Haskell describes Australia as an alien place, more evoked through nostalgia than any current reality. Among the poems I find most evocative in Haskell’s volume are those about travelling to his first “home,” and being between cultures.

In the poem “Abracadabra” from the 1993 collection of the same name, Haskell describes air time between another country and Australia as an altered state of consciousness where,

... hours stretch out like piers
on a faltering shoreline...
your body
mozzarella stretched...
between God-knows-how different
time zone you left and this gleaming city... (21)

Still in “Abracadabra,” Haskell effectively explores Australia’s uneasy relationship with Europe, and most especially, Britain:

Perth’s innocent nose-thumbing

gesture... Toy knights
 on its clock mock
 the continent of passports and history,
 here, where no stain of history
 debunks the landscape,
 all those tin can soldiers
 on horse, the splotchy mania
 of human rebellion whip-straining...
 Even the lash tongued convicts, the hope laden fleets
 sailed an East coast
 world away. Under WA's blitz of blue skies,
 skies like a perpetual
 shrugging of the shoulders,
 lie a city mapped as rectangular neatness
 where fingers snap and
 the abracadabra of the future
 cries out incessantly... (22)

Living outside his culture has given Haskell a heightened awareness of Australia's negotiation with history.

Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and her inspiration, scholar Northrop Fry, labelled writing by Canadians as an unavoidable dialogue with landscape. In his introduction to *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems* Haskell states that while similar assertions have been made about Australian writers, his poetry is not linked to landscape. Yet some of the most evocative and lyrical poems in the collection are set in a rural Australia, albeit one with a European past.

In "Near Gwabegar," the first poem in the book and an early piece from his 1984 collection, "Listening at Night," Haskell beautifully evokes the rural Australia as observed from a vehicle:

Past town children who
 have known no season
 other than summer,
 past 'roo signs
 whacked by buckshot,
 and red-dust tracks
 ploughed by clapped out sedans;
 past fine-grained heaps
 of heated dust,
 riverbeds like coarse throats,
 creeks of colour-drained gums, under
 air hung like a colourless curtain... (1)

In the introduction Haskell describes his fellow countrymen as wary of “‘culture-vultures,’ self-boosting and rhetoric.” He avows that he is a Professor of English who “detest(s) academic poetry” (ix). While I respect his commitment to making his poetry accessible, I think too many pieces in this *Selected Poems* explain rather than evoke. That tendency has made me wonder how much objective editorial input Haskell sought for this *Selected Poems*.

The best poems in *What Are You Doing Here?* employ original similes and metaphors – some already mentioned. Lines like “the streets manufacture/ staccato thunder, as if noise/ rained out of the sky” (26), in otherwise effective poems such as “In New Bangkok” suggest Haskell doesn’t like to strangle his darlings. In the poem “Abracadabra,” mentioned earlier, the ending would have been more effective if he’d finished with these strong and original lines:

Who here could not
feel fluttering inside
the immense, tawny
moth of happiness.

Instead of, “*one great day after another/ sunset-flush’d upon the yellow sand*” (23).

At the start of this review I asked a series of questions about the risk that poets from former colonies will exoticise “foreign” locales they inhabit. It isn’t possible to determine if that’s true with exploration of one *Selected Poems* – Dennis Haskell’s *What Are You Doing Here?* However, I think it is our responsibility as ex-pat writers to keep asking ourselves if we have exoticised the “foreign” to satisfy our own myths.

In one of the final (and most recent) poems in his *Selected Poems* – “At the Balay Internasyonal” – Dennis Haskell appears more “at home” in a “foreign” environment. Set in Manila, where Haskell taught at the University of the Philippines, this poem describes the narrator’s comfort as, “... translucent / insects the shape of commas.../ a flesh coloured gecko/ camouflaged on the wall/ kept me company...” (160).

He appears to enjoy a sense of peace, and belonging there, even though,

... silence never visited. A great racket
of traffic argued incessantly
on the nearby highway:
A cacophony of cars, beeping jeepnays, ruptured trucks
a wheeze of fraying motorbikes
haggled for position... (160)

I recognise that Manila and find more acceptance than judgment in Haskell’s portrait.

In the three page poem, “Doubt and Trembling” from his collection “All the Time in the World” (2006), Haskell explores the endless questions raised by life in the “imperial city” – which could represent any metropolis, not only Washington or Beijing:

How do we get by
in a dubious time
but by endless modification
to the commodifications of self...? (122-23)

In spite of some tendency to exoticise in *What Are You Doing Here?* and inclusion of some older poems which do not represent his best work, Dennis Haskell’s *What Are You Doing Here?: Selected Poems* shows that he has modified his way of seeing during the years he has spent abroad. He continues to ask the questions any poet should ask him, or herself, when living away from “home.”

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